

Robin, and an occasional Jay added in turn their voices to wake up the slumbers of bird life.

That blue flash! What is it? Yes, there are the three pretty objects of my curiosity, perched on the telegraph wires where I last saw them, as quiet and easy of manner, as confiding and thoughtless of danger, and even more beautiful than on the evening before. I had killed hundreds of birds in my life: I had never felt such an absorbing interest in one before; yet on no occasion did I ever raise my gun with so much reluctance to take a life. And when at length I held in my hand a beautiful lifeless form, heard its two little friends, companions of its long journey and dreary nights, whispering to one another, methought, in mournful tones; when I saw them rise in the air, uttering a loud shrill note that sounded in my guilty ears like the curse of betrayed innocence, and fly away never to be seen by me again, my heart grew heavy, and I almost cursed that professional incredulity which drives an amateur into acts of needless cruelty. And even now as I raise my eyes from the paper, and look upon the graceful form, perched on a tiny stand, ornamented more than usual as if to make some restitution for the destruction of its life, the motionless presence recalls the events of that sunny April morning, and stirs anew the feeling of regret and pain.

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## THE PRESENT CONDITION OF SOME OF THE BIRD ROOKERIES OF THE GULF COAST OF FLORIDA.

BY W. E. D. SCOTT.

### *Second Paper.*

SATURDAY, May 8. We were up and away early. Sailed out of the Nyakka River and along the northwest shores of Charlotte Harbor as far as Cape Haze; saw very few birds, and those only the commoner species.

From Cape Haze we crossed the harbor to the mouth of Matlacha Pass, the wind blowing almost a gale from the west.

This pass is between the mainland and Pine Island, the largest of the islands in Charlotte Harbor. On the way over my attention was attracted by large flocks of Man-o'-war Birds, which, with an ease and grace that surprised me, were fishing in the rough water during a very strong wind. There were hundreds of them in all phases of plumage.

We reached our destination—the island which Mr. Wilkerson had told me was the breeding place of Reddish Egrets—at about four o'clock, and at once came to anchor. A few Herons were to be seen from time to time flying to the island, and presently I took the small boat and went ashore to reconnoitre. This had evidently been only a short time before a large rookery. The trees were full of nests, some of which still contained eggs, and hundreds of broken eggs strewed the ground everywhere. Fish Crows and both kinds of Buzzards were present in great numbers and were rapidly destroying the remaining eggs. I found a huge pile of dead, half decayed birds, lying on the ground which had apparently been killed for a day or two. All of them had the 'plumes' taken with a patch of the skin from the back, and some had the wings cut off; otherwise they were uninjured. I counted over two hundred birds treated in this way. The most common species was the Reddish Egret, though there were about as many Louisiana Herons; the other species were the Snowy Heron, Great White Egret, and the Little Blue Heron in both phases of plumage. There were also a few Pelicans, White Ibises, and one or two Great Blue Herons. I remained there till almost dark, but did not fire at any of the few frightened Herons (about fifty in all), which came to roost on the island. Among these I noticed a few Reddish Egrets and two of the so-called Peale's Egrets, but most of the birds were the commoner species of Heron. This was the rookery that Mr. Wilkerson had spoken of; within the last few days it had been almost destroyed, hundreds of old birds having been killed and thousands of eggs broken. I do not know of a more horrible and brutal exhibition of wanton destruction than that which I witnessed here. I shall have to refer to this point later, as I visited it again in about a week, and there learned from a man I met further details of the slaughter, the results of which I had witnessed.

Sunday, May 9. This morning Capt. Baker went with me in the small boat to explore in detail the neighboring islands. We

found a lamentable scarcity of birds, and the Captain assured me that ten years before, when on fishing trips in these same waters, and at about the same time of year, the whole region fairly teemed with bird life of all kinds.

About 12 o'clock we returned to the sloop and got under way, going through the pass in the direction of Punta Rossa. After sailing along for some six or seven miles we came in sight of a small island where many Brown Pelicans were breeding or about to breed. We anchored and went to the island in question to have a closer look at the inhabitants. The Pelicans, of which there were some forty or fifty pairs, were just beginning to build. There were also some Reddish Egrets, a few of which were in the white phase of plumage. Beside these were many *Ardea ruficollis tricolor*, some *Ardea candidissima*, and a few *Ardea egretta*. None of the Herons, save a pair of *Ardea virescens*, had begun to build; the others were only looking the ground over. I fancied that some of them had been driven to this point from the large rookery found deserted the evening before. I watched the rookery till dark, not firing at anything; a great many Herons of all the kinds above enumerated, as well as one pair of *A. herodias*, many Florida Cormorants, White Ibises, and additional pairs of Pelicans came to roost at the island. All of them were very shy and suspicious, being startled by the slightest noise or movement, and none of the birds would come near the island until the small boat had returned to the sloop. Just at dusk six of the so-called Peale's Egrets came in and alighted on the mangroves close by me. I learned later that the birds on this island had been much persecuted by gunners, and that thousands of all the species seen here had formerly bred and roosted at this point. Also that at one time many Roseate Spoonbills (*Ajaja ajaja*) had made this a roosting place.

Monday, May 10. In the morning we camped on the island, about half a mile away from the rookery, and during the day I added to my collection seven Reddish Egrets, one Peale's Egret, and four other Herons, including a fine *A. herodias*. Among the Reddish Egrets taken were three specimens which showed a very considerable admixture of *white* feathers on the head, throat, and breast, thus approaching the Peale's Egret type; and there is no question in my mind but that the two phases are forms of the same species. For further remarks on this matter

I refer to certain notes made by Mr. James Henry Devereux in Tampa Bay and published by me in the 'Bulletin of the Nuttall Ornithological Club,' Vol. VII, 1881, p. 20.

While hunting to-day I heard repeatedly the song of a Vireo that was new to me, but as the birds were shy and kept in the densest mangrove swamps, I was unable to procure one. Thanks, however, to Mr. Atkins, then at Punta Rossa, but now of Key West, I later identified the species as the Black-whiskered Vireo (*Vireo altiloquus barbatulus*), as I have already recorded (Auk, Vol. IV, April, 1887, pp. 133-134).

During the afternoon there were countless Man-o'-war Birds flying over in enormous flocks, and at great height.

Tuesday, May 11. The Captain and Mr. Dickinson went to Punta Rossa for water and letters, and I spent the day making into skins the birds killed late yesterday. About 5.30 in the evening I went to the rookery, but though I sent the boat back to our camp, and though not a gun had been fired in the heronry during the day, the birds were so alarmed by the little shooting I had done the day before, that but very few birds save Brown Pelicans came to roost at the rookery. I mention this to show how very wary the birds had become, and how well they knew the meaning of the report of a gun. I took only seven birds during the time between half past five and dark.

Wednesday, May 12. Wishing to visit again the rookery before mentioned, the Captain and myself started in the small boat early this morning, leaving Mr. Dickinson in charge of the sloop and camp. We had only some seven miles to go, and reached our destination about noon. On the way through the islands there were many Reddish Egrets and other small Herons, but all were very shy and had evidently been much hunted. After getting some dinner and making a sort of camping place for the night on one of the islands, we went, about the middle of the afternoon, to the rookery.

The condition of affairs here was much the same as I have already described, except that not having been disturbed for a few days, the birds were beginning to come back to the ground in considerable numbers, and many Louisiana Herons were building, and some had nests with one or two eggs.

We found, in camp at the rookery, Mr. Frank Johnson, of Mound Key, whose postoffice address is Punta Rossa, Florida,

and who is a professional 'bird-plumer.' He had returned to this point this afternoon, having been here a few weeks earlier, when he had found the birds very numerous. He was hunting plumes, particularly of the Snowy Heron, American Egret, and Reddish Egret, as they brought the highest prices, but he killed to sell to the 'taxidermists,' as he called them, "almost anything that wore feathers." He said he wished there was some law to protect the birds, at least during the breeding time, which would not be violated. He added, however, that as everybody else was 'pluming', he had made up his mind that he might as well have his share.

He was killing birds and taking plumes now for Mr. J. H. Batty, of New York City, who employed many men along the entire Gulf Coast from Cedar Keys to Key West. When asked what Mr. Batty purchased, it was again "almost anything that wore feathers, but more particularly the Herons, Spoon-bills, and showy birds."

Mr. Batty was, he told me, well known all along the Gulf Coast, and had made regular trips to this region for the past three winters or more. He was the gentleman I heard of at Hickory Bluff, who bought birds, travelling about the coast in a small schooner and supplying the native gunners with breech-loading shot guns and ammunition. Mr. Johnson had bought a gun of Mr. Batty and was using it when I met him. One barrel of this gun was for shot, 12-guage, and the other was a small bore rifled. This last, Johnson explained to me, he used for Pelicans and other wild birds, and as it made so little noise, was serviceable in getting the smaller Herons at close range in the rookeries.

I shall give later more details of Mr. Batty and his method of working, as I met him and stayed about for some five or six days where he was killing birds. To go on with Mr. Johnson. He had lived about here for many years, and told me of the enormous rookeries and breeding places that had formerly been the homes of the birds of this region. Now most of them were entirely deserted, and the number of those still resorted to by an ever decreasing population were yearly becoming smaller; that it was easy to find thousands of birds, five or six years back, where absolutely none existed now. My own observation leads me to agree with this statement, but, in fact, the destruction must have been greater than can be realized.

Mr. Johnson told me of the extermination of a Brown Pelican Rookery, near where he lived, which is a very fair example of the atrocities that have been and are still being committed to obtain 'bird plumes.'

It seems that the year before the Brown Pelicans selected a small mangrove island near to that on which Mr. Johnson lived, and about eighty or a hundred pairs made nests, laid eggs, and hatched out their young. Johnson had not touched the birds or disturbed them, as he proposed to let them rear their young. But one afternoon when Johnson was absent from home hunting, the old Frenchman before referred to, A. Lechevallier, came in with a boat, and deliberately killed off the old birds as they were feeding the young, obtaining about one hundred and eighty of them. The young, about three weeks old, to the number of several hundred at least, and utterly unable to care for themselves in any way, were simply left to starve to death in their nests, or to be eaten by raccoons and Buzzards. It is needless to say that the birds never came back to that rookery.

There were very few birds that came in to roost at the rookery where we were, and I killed only one Reddish Egret. I paid Johnson two dollars not to shoot, so that I might get a good idea of the birds, both as to kind and number that roosted there. Johnson went with us back to the camp, and it was during the evening that he gave the information transcribed above.

Thursday, May 13. Going back to the sloop this morning I saw very few birds; in the afternoon I went out to the roosting place and killed two Reddish Egrets; one of them had large patches of white feathers on the throat, neck, breast, and back. A flock of them in the pure white phase (*A. pealei*) flew by me, just out of gun shot, during the afternoon. These birds are not at all uncommon at this locality, but are not so numerous as at points further south. They are well known by the 'plume hunters' as 'muffled-jawed Egrets', and sound and flat skins of them command good prices. I saw, in a rookery at the north entrance to Matlacha Pass, among a great pile of other birds that had been recently killed and their plumes removed, twelve of this phase that were easily recognizable, having had only the skin of part of the back, neck, and head taken off.

For the last few days I have noted Black-bellied Plover in full plumage, going north in considerable flocks. These were,



I think, undoubtedly *Charadrius squatarola*, although no specimens were obtained. I am much impressed with the great numbers of the far northward breeding birds which are present still in large numbers at points about here. At any of the passes or outside beaches I see daily and in large flocks such birds as *Charadrius squatarola*, *Ægialitis semipalmata*, *Arenaria interpres*, *Macroramphus griseus*, *Tringa canutus*, *T. minutilla*, *T. alpina*, *Calidris arenaria*, etc. These I carefully identified and made almost daily notes of their occurrence until the 25th of May. After that observations were made of *Macroramphus griseus* in large flocks as late as June 10.

Friday, May 14. Spent the day in waiting for some of the larger birds to dry—so as to pack them—and in hunting for the Black-whiskered Vireos, which appear to be common but particularly wary and difficult to see in the thick mangrove.

Saturday, May 15. Packed up everything in readiness to continue course to-morrow, leaving birds to dry until the last moment.

Sunday, May 16. Left early this morning, and going south about four miles, anchored again off two large mangrove islands just inside of the south end of Pine Island. Here were more birds breeding than at any point where we had thus far cruised. These were principally Brown Pelicans, and there must have been at least two hundred pairs or more. The nests were in most cases finished, and many of them contained eggs.

The Florida Cormorants also had nests in considerable numbers, and beside these a few pairs of Great Blue Herons were breeding on the island. No other birds were breeding here.

There were many thousands of Man-o'-war Birds that made this a roosting or resting place, and many of them were here more or less through the day, their numbers being greatly augmented every night. They were in all phases of plumage and generally moulting.

The birds are said not to breed anywhere on the Gulf Coast, except at two points near Key West, and the breeding season, judging from the examples of the birds obtained, was past by two or three months. These birds haunt the Pelican and Heron rookeries, preying on the fish brought to the young birds, and are as truly parasitic as the Jaegers. Often, too, I have seen

them chasing the small Gulls, obliging them to give up fish just caught. Again they are to be seen in the wake of a school of porpoises, taking whatever comes in their way, such as mutilated fish and the like.

In the nests of the Great Blue Herons in the rookery, four nests in all, I was surprised to find young birds. In most cases they were nearly ready to fly, but one nest contained chicks not more than two weeks old. This, taken in connection with the fact of their having half grown young as early as February 7, at Tarpon Springs—a point more than a hundred miles north—is indicative of a long breeding season—at least five or six months—and the probability that two broods are hatched. However, this late breeding may not be normal, for the birds are all so harassed and driven about by plume hunters, that their plans for breeding are evidently greatly disarranged.

Perhaps the following facts will make this more apparent to the reader and corroborate the above statement.

I have several times taken the different species of Herons and Egrets at *roosting rookeries* where there was not a single nest, and far away from any known breeding ground, which had in their ovaries fully developed eggs with shells on. Some of them had evidently laid one or more eggs and, being severely frightened by hunters, had deserted their breeding grounds. At such rookeries I have frequently found broken eggs lying on the ground, though there would be no nests on the island and the birds would only come to roost late in the afternoon and leave very early in the morning.

Again during the late summer and early-fall months of the present year I have twice found inland rookeries where the nests still contained some eggs and where there were young birds of all ages. One such case was near Tarpon Springs where several hundred birds were breeding, August 26, 1886. At this date there were unhatched eggs in the nests, besides young in all stages, from those just hatched to those ready to fly. The birds were mainly *Ardea carulea*, though there were a few *A. ruficollis tricolor*, and *A. candidissima*.

At the rookery last mentioned before this digression, I spent the day after eleven o'clock, and as I did not fire a gun during the time there was ample opportunity to examine the various species that were breeding, and those that came to roost there at



night. Among the latter were many Reddish Egrets, a few of which were in the white phase, and all of the common Herons and Egrets in small numbers.

Monday, May 17. Obtained a number of Man-'o-war Birds as they flew by our anchorage, the weather being stormy. The day was about consumed in making them into skins. All of these birds were moulting and some of them I took to be young of that year.

Tuesday, May 18. Spent about as yesterday, save that I was all the afternoon at the rookery, where the birds seem to have increased in numbers, especially at roosting times, and I think that some other breeding place, not very remote, having been attacked by the plume hunters, numbers of the birds have been driven off and have escaped to this point.

Wednesday, May 19. Packed up all the birds collected at this and other points, all having been unpacked to dry, and started in in the afternoon for Punta Rossa, some six miles distant. I have omitted to state that our camp for the past few days had been on the north point at the mouth of the Caloosahatchie River and at least a mile away from the rookery. Arriving at Punta Rossa at about four o'clock, I soon made the acquaintance of Mr. J. W. Atkins, the assistant telegraph operator at this point, the cable for Key West and Cuba having its starting point at Punta Rossa. Mr. Atkins is much interested in birds, and has a good collection of skins made in the main just about Punta Rossa.

His collection embraces most of the commoner species of small birds that occur in the vicinity, and I noticed such rare birds as Cape May Warblers, and a single Mangrove Cuckoo, taken at Punta Rossa. Here we obtained the *Dendroica discolor* described at length in 'The Auk' for April, 1887 (p. 134).

Thursday, May 20. We waited for the mail to arrive and about 10 A. M. started again on our cruise, this time going to the east of Pine Island, and kept a northerly course; for, wishing to look over some of the ground in more detail on the way back, I had determined to go no further south. At Punta Rossa to-day I again met Mr. Abe Wilkerson, who had just returned from his trip to the Myakka Lakes, where he did not meet with much success, for though he found large rookeries, the birds had been so persistently hunted they had become very wild. He had about seventy-five 'plumes,' I believe, as the result of the trip,

mostly of the Snowy Heron. He told me that the Mexican Buzzard, as he called it, was common in the region where he had been and showed me a skin of one that he had killed. The bird was *Polyborus cheriway*, and it breeds in this area, at least such is my conjecture from birds of the year that have been sent to me from the vicinity of the headwaters of the Myakka River.

Wanting a good pilot and a man conversant with the country I hired Mr. Wilkerson to make the trip with me back to Tarpon Springs, and besides the work he did I gained much valuable information concerning the condition of the breeding grounds further south, and the decrease in birds during the past few years. Without going into too great details, it was substantially the same as the facts gathered from Frank Johnson, Mr. Atkins, and others, and is a story of almost a war of extermination.

To-day we passed a large rookery known as the Boca Grande Rookery, and here I saw a few 'Pink Curlews,' as the 'plumers' call *Ajaja ajaja*, but as there was a constant discharge of guns, and as the war seemed to be going on without any appearance of ceasing, we passed on without stopping. The principal birds seemed to be Man-o'-war Birds and Brown Pelicans, and though there were large numbers of each, Captain Baker said that when he was fishing for a season at this point a few years before, there were hundreds of birds of all kinds at this rookery where there was one now.

We kept on our course north and, sailing up along the east coast of Pine Island, crossed over the mouth of Charlotte Harbor and anchored for the night at a deserted fishing station just south of Big Gasparilla Pass. It was quite dark when we anchored here, so I saw no birds. But during the afternoon and until dark large flocks—hundreds—of Gulls, which I thought were mostly *Larus atricilla*, passed close to the water, not fishing but evidently migrating northward. Many of these birds were in immature plumage, and I shall have occasion to refer to them again later in connection with other species observed.

(To be continued.)